ALMA THOMAS BROOKS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

AFRO-AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO
PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

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Alma Thomas Brooks.
Alma Brooks

Date Jan 25-1979.

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Co-Sponsored by:
The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library, and
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Project Coordinator: Lynn Bonfield

INTERVIEW WITH MRS. ALMA THOMAS BROOKS

OCTOBER 17, 1978

At 1025 Fillmore Street, Apt. 11-L, San Francisco

Interviewer: Jesse J. Warr, III
Transcriber: Mary A. Wells

BEGIN TAPE 1

JW: We can start with your birthplace and birthdate.

AB: Oh, my birth? San Francisco.

JW: Where were your parents living at that time?

AB: We were in the Presidio.

JW: In the Presidio?

AB: Yes. I was born in the Presidio.

JW: Was your father a military person?

AB: No, he worked for the Federal government.

JW: And what year were you born?

AB: 1905. January 15.

JW: 1905.

AB: Yes.

JW: Do you remember any particular stories or things that were said about you as a baby, as a very small child, that were told to you later... about your appearance or anything like that?

AB: Oh, yes. They told me about my great-grandmother. Yes, she was my great-grandmother. She was the one who came from Philadelphia out here in a covered wagon. She was half Indian and half Pennsylvania Dutch. And she married a Jamaican.

JW: And you were supposed to have looked like her somthing like that?

AB: No, I don't look like her. She was tall and stately.

JW: What was your maiden name?

AB: My maiden name? Thomas.

JW: I mean your full name.

AB: Alma Sarah Louise Thomas.

JW: Sarah Louise?

AB: Yes.

JW: Are those two different names? Three names?

AB: Yes. I was the only girl born and they gave me all of it.

JW: Were you named for anyone particular?

AB: Alma is named after Mrs. Alma DeB Spreckels. Sarah is my aunt and Louise is my mother's name.

JW: Why were you named for Mrs. Spreckels?

AB: Well, they all were friends.

JW: Aren't they a wealthy old family?

AB: Oh, yes. They are a wealthy old family. And Adolph Spreckels.

JW: What business were they in?

AB: The sugar business.

JW: The question I asked before was whether there was anything that people said about <u>you</u> as a baby...you know, anything particular about...or was it just a normal birth and no one commented on in any particular way?

AB: No, they didn't. The boys were commented on out in the Presidio, but not the girls.

JW: (Chuckle) Oh, why was that?

AB: Because they can go in the Army.

JW: They looked on them as soldiers even in the crib, huh?

AB: Yes.

JW: What was the first house that you remember living in?

AB: Oh, let me see. Out in the barracks, out in the Presidio...Officers' quarters. We lived in the Officers' quarters.

JW: How long did you live there?

AB: Oh, we lived there quite a while. And my father went down to the Customs House, Appraisers Building. He was still working for the Government.

JW: What kind of work was he doing?

AB: Chemistry. He analyzed the different foods and things.

JW: Was he working for the Food and Drug Administration?

AB: Well, I don't know what they called it then, but I remember he analyzed foods.

JW: Did your mother also work?

AB: No, no, Momma never worked.

JW: How old were you when you moved out of the Presidio?

AB: We moved out the Presidio...I don't know when, or how old I was when I moved out of the Presidio. Because Grandpa owned property at 2758 Greenwich Street. And we lived at 3117 Broderick.

JW: But you were still very small when you moved out?

AB: Yes.

JW: So what was the house like on Broderick Street?

AB: Oh, it was a two-flat house. It's still there. The home is still there. It goes right off into the [Golden Gate] Bridge. The home is still there.

JW: Was this the Cow Hollow area?

AB: Oh, yes. Cow Hollow.

JW: Did it have a yard, and how many bedrooms, and that kind of thing?

AB: Oh, we had three bedrooms, and front room, dining room, kitchen and the back porch and big yard. Yes.

JW: Did you live on both floors?

AB: No, we lived on one.

JW: Who lived on the other one?

AB: Mrs. Hart, Bell Hart. [?]

JW: Was she Black?

AB: Yes. She came from Canada. She's a Canadian.

JW: She lived by herself?

AB: No, she had a daughter, and a husband.

JW: How did it happen that you moved into that area? Was that a Negro area?

AB: Well, because...There were no Negroes here (Chuckle), to tell you the truth. There were no Negroes here. The only ones that I knew were Mrs. Hart and my family. Mostly only our family. Because in our district it was only Italians and Irish and Germans... Italians, Irish, and German and French. There were a lot of Italians.

JW: How did it happen then that the Black families found each other... her family, Mrs. Hart's family, and your family?

AB: Well, she accidentally came by. She was very fair. They thought she was White. A real estate man brought her to the place.

JW: Do you know anything about why she came here from Canada?

AB: No, she just came down here from Canada.

JW: Was it British Columbia or farther East?

AB: No, near Quebec.

JW: Oh, I see.

AB: Yes, Canada.

JW: Was her daughter also fair?

AB: Yes, very fair.

JW: So, did they just "pass"?

AB: No, they did not "pass".

JW: They did not?

AB: No, Uh-huh.

JW: Well, who did you play with as a child?

AB: Oh, just White children. I didn't know any other Negroes. They didn't find...really, I didn't find any Negroes until Reverend Byers came here.

JW: He was minister of where?

AB: An A.M.E. church that used to be on Geary. Now it's on Golden Gate.

JW: About when was it when he came here?

AB: Oh, I was about sixteen years old.

JW: So up until that point your contacts had been your family and the rest of the community...but very few Blacks.

AB: Yes. And then the Thompsons came. The Thompsons came. They lived on Scott Street. Mary and Agnes Thompson and their mother. But she married Roddy [?] Wilkerson. The mother was a widow, and she married Roddy Wilkerson.

JW: Is this the same Thompson family that Myrtle Hightower is related to?

AB: Oh, no.

JW: This is another Thompson family?

AB: They came later, way later. He worked out to the Presidio too, her father did.

JW: That's what I know. That's why I asked you.

AB: That's how we met him by him walking by so much...walking by on Lombard Street. He always walked to work and that's how we got acquainted with him. Otherwise, we didn't know any other Negroes at the time.

JW: Did it matter to you...at that age?

AB: Oh, no, uh-huh. There was no segregation in San Francisco. Everybody went together. Where I was, anyway. If one had a party, we all went. And if I had a party, they came to ours.

JW: Did your parents allow you to have friends over to the house often?

AB: Oh, yes. We had a lot of friends. But mostly they were White.

JW: Did your parents entertain much, or were they more quiet people?

AB: No. No, they didn't entertain. No, it was different. We didn't do a whole lot of entertaining in those days. Everybody made cakes and things. And everybody had tea. My mother always had tea and cake, or strawberry shortcake, everyday at four o'clock. That was her tradition.

JW: Was she of English background?

AB: No, I don't see how she could be, when she was German and Indian and Negro.

JW: Was that a common custom for people to have?

AB: Yes. No, it was a common custom with my mother.

JW: But I mean with other people?

AB: I don't know what the other people did, but she always did.

JW: And would the whole family be there for tea?

AB: Yes. My mother always had something ready for us after school.

JW: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

AB: I had...There were five brothers, but one brother died. And there were two girls.

JW: What number were you?

AB: I was the first girl. I was the second child. Daniel Thomas was my first brother.

JW: And what happened to him?

AB: Oh, he married. He went on to school and everything.

JW: What kind of profession did he take up?

AB: He worked for the Hartford Fire Insurance Company.

JW: Here?

AB: Here in the city.

JW: Did he work as a janitor?

AB: No, no. It wasn't janitorial. No, it wasn't.

JW: He sold insurance?

AB: No, he worked in insurance. You know how they have different people in the offices? He worked in the office.

JW: About what period of time are we talking about, the Twenties, the Thirties?

AB: Yes, in the Twenties and Thirties, I know.

JW: Okay. Somebody had told me that there weren't any Black people "upstairs" in insurance.

AB: Oh, yes. He was. Uh-huh.

JW: He was then some kind of a clerk?

AB: Yes, "clerk", I guess they would call it. And he was in the... he worked for George Litchinstein. [?] He was the manager of the whole area, the Western area of the Hartford Life Insurance Company... George Litchinstein. I knew his family well.

JW: Then you are the second child. Who was third?

AB: Well, my brother that died, Harold.

JW: He died at a young age?

AB: Yes, he was only eighteen months old.

JW: And then who was the fourth?

AB: Then came Byers [?] but he calls himself Henry. And then there came William. And then...I think it was Maxine.

JW: Who came after Maxine?

AB: She was the baby.

JW: Okay. So I've got one, two, three, four, five, six...there's somebody missing.

AB: Edward.

JW: Okay.

AB: Edward was my brother.

JW: What was Henry or Byers' occupation as an adult?

AB: What did he do?...I know he studied art and he sang. That's because he was very attached to the Spreckels, and on account of him...my mother was an artist too. She was an artist and a vocalist.

JW: What kind of art are we talking about? Oil painting?

AB: Oil painting and she could...just like you sitting there, well, she could just draw you like nothing. So could my brother. Both... they went to art school.

JW: So do you have a lot of pictures that they did of the family?

AB: No, I haven't.

JW: Did you have them at one time and they got lost?

AB: Yes, we did have. They got lost. She could do painting on black satin.

JW: On what?

AB: On black satin material. She would paint flowers and things on black satin. And I turned out to be a dressmaker, seamstress.

JW: We'll come back to that, of course. I'm just detouring on the rest of the members of your family so I can get sort of a picture of what the family was like. Was Henry able to make a living as an artist?

AB: No, he didn't. No, he couldn't, but he did do some. He worked downtown on Maiden Lane in a shoe shop. He used to help the shoemaker with the shoes.

JW: Making them?

AB: Well, you know, he used to half-sole the shoes and put the heels on. He did that type of work.

JW: What did Edward do when he...?

AB: Oh, he was the baby. When the War broke out he went over to Honolulu, and he worked with the Government over there.

JW: Is this the First World War we're talking about?

AB: Yes.

JW: And did he stay in Hawaii?

AB: Yes.

JW: For the rest of his life?

AB: Yes, he passed away over there. Yes, he stayed.

JW: William?

AB: Oh, what did William do? He worked for the Government too.

JW: In what kind of capacity?

AB: Oh, he was...he drove those big trucks. He was a truck driver... those great big things he was driving. He was a truck driver.

JW: And finally Maxine.

AB: Well, Maxine...what did Maxine do? She didn't do hardly anything 'cause she was going to school most of the time.

JW: Did she get married?

AB: Oh, yes. She married. She married Henry Coleman. Then they got a divorce. And then she married Charles Gore. He was in the Navy for thirty years and she traveled with him. They have their home in San Diego.

JW: What was your family's exact affiliation with the Spreckels? How did they come in contact with them?

AB: Well, we always seemed to be...There weren't many people here in San Francisco. And everybody seemed to be...got acquainted with one another.

JW: Well, what was the special relationship between you and that family in particular?

AB: The Spreckels?

JW: Yes.

AB: Well, my father knew most, you know, by him working, I guess, he got acquainted with the Spreckels. And we were always friends together.

JW: Well, if they were wealthy, why didn't they help your brothers get better paying jobs? Most of them seemed to end up having to work for Uncle Sam.

AB: Well, Uncle Sam was a good place to work for.

JW: Yes, but compared to the Spreckels, one of the major fortunes in San Francisco.

AB: Yes, I know. The Spreckels and Dolly Fritz' father, Eugene Fritz. He was quite wealthy. I didn't know them until later. And Mark Gerstle and William Gerstle.

JW: What I'm asking is why didn't they employ your brothers?

AB: Well, they never, they never went down there. Maybe they never asked for any jobs from the Spreckels. They never bothered them, you know. We were more just friends.

JW: Would you say that you were close to your brothers and sister when you were very young?

AB: Oh, yes.

JW: You played together and that sort of thing?

AB: Yes. My brother always took me every place I went...Dan, the oldest. We always were chaperoned. We didn't run around like the kids do now.

JW: Did your parents treat the boys differently than the girls?

AB: Oh, no, we were always treated very good, all except me, because I was the only girl. My father favored girls. He'd go out and do different things for me. He'd take me to lunch. And every Saturday the whole family would...We used to have a ferry boat here. And we always went over to Oakland and [then would] come back over to San Francisco. We always went out on Saturdays for lunch. And Adolph Spreckels, he would be on the boat sometimes and he would...he would give...he would always give me money, but he wouldn't give the boys. He said the boys should always learn to make their own living. But he favored giving me money because I was the only girl.

JW: What would you do when you went over to Oakland?

AB: Well, we'd visit sometimes. See, I had an aunt. After the Earthquake and Fire, my aunt, Aunt Maude--Estelle is her real name--she moved to Oakland. She wouldn't come back to San Francisco after the Earthquake and Fire. You couldn't get her to live over here. You see, we got burnt out. My mother's people were living on Vallejo and Hyde. And that's how we lost the property on account of we couldn't...the deeds were lost. At the City Hall everything got burnt.

JW: Well, who got the property then?

AB: Nobody got the property because we didn't have the deeds.

JW: I mean that must have happened to thousands of people. So why didn't they just let people speak for one another and say "I know they used to live there," and "I know that that's what they owned"?

AB: Well, they didn't. They didn't do that.

JW: So then who eventually got it? Did it eventually revert to the City?

AB: Yes, to the City, and then the City sold it. Because Joe Tobin[?] of the Hibernia Bank, he was trying to find out if we could get it back...Joe Tobin. He died not very long ago. See, the Hibernia Bank was my grandfather's bank. So we knew the Tobins quite well... the family did.

JW: What kinds of household chores were you required to do?

AB: Who, I?

JW: Yes.

AB: I didn't do much of anything because I was sewing. I did more sewing than anything. My mother never let me out in the kitchen to cook. The only thing I cooked was cookies or cake. But I never cooked. My mother...I never washed. I never ironed.

JW: Well, who did all of that?

AB: Momma used to take care of the house.

JW: Well, did the boys do any of that?

AB: Yes. They washed the dishes sometimes. But she never let me do that.

JW: Who were you sewing for, the family primarily?

AB: No, I worked in a dress shop. I worked for Belle Fisher and...I worked for Miss Belle Fisher and Gertrude Robinson and...what was her name? Ives. (Oh, I can't think of her name now.) We were just in the Murphy Building, across the way from the...from Sloane's down on Polk Street. Jocelyn Ives.[?] That's who I worked for.

JW: How old were you when you started working there?

AB: When I started sewing? I started sewing downtown when I was about eighteen...seventeen and a half. It was during vacation time and I got the job, working for Belle Fisher. She was at 1515 Clay Street, next door to Third Baptist Church. And she only sewed for the wealthy. Most all these people sewed for the wealthy. That's why I knew so many of the wealthy people.

JW: But I mean before you got to be in your late teens, what kinds...?

AB: I was going to school.

JW: And your mother didn't have you do anything when you got home?

AB: Well, I sewed, and I was making clothes for myself.

JW: Did you ever get spanked?

AB: Oh, yes. Everybody got spanked in those days. (Laughs). Oh, yes.

JW: How often, and how severely?

AB: Oh, not very often 'cause they didn't want to...Not me, because I was the only girl. They didn't spank me very often.

JW: Did you feel you deserved it when you got it?

AB: Well, no. Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't.

JW: What kinds of games did little girls play in those days?

AB: Oh, we played jacks and jump-rope a lot.

JW: Were you allowed to go to the beach?

AB: Oh, no...Yes, we did go to the beach, later on. Yes, later we went to the beach. The beach was a lovely place at that time. And then sometimes the family would take a picnic basket and go out to the beach and out to Fleishhacker.

JW: You could go in the pool?

AB: No, my mother never would let me go swimming on account of my cousin. He would be my second cousin. He got drowned in the Russian River. So she never let me go swimming.

JW: There was no discrimination at Fleishhacker Pool?

AB: No. Uh-huh.

JW: Do you remember any other games or songs or things that you played when you were very young?

AB: I used to dance a lot. Dancing was one of my hobbies. I've been dancing ever since I've been two years old 'cause my mother and father, they used to go. They used to teach me all the new steps that came in. (Laughter)

JW: What other kinds of things did the family do in [their] leisure times together? Go to the beach? Go to Oakland on the ferry?

AB: And we'd go out to Golden Gate Park. We used to have a horse and buggy in those days. We'd go in the horse and buggy...take a ride around Golden Gate Park in the horse and buggy. They would, you know, rent the horse and buggy.

JW: Did you ever take trips out of town?

AB: No, we were quite established in San Francisco. We stayed mostly in San Francisco. Because my grandmother and grandfather were living and we lived...we always stayed near Grandma and Grandpa. And mostly every Sunday we'd go over to Grandpa's and Grandma's.

JW: And they were living where? Were they the ones on Greenwich?

AB: 2758 Greenwich.

JW: How did the family celebrate Christmas?

AB: Oh, everybody got together and we had big meals...oh, God, we used to have big meals! Umph! And then everybody got toys. And everybody got new clothes.

JW: Did you have a tree?

AB: Oh, yes. You always had a Christmas tree.

JW: And sang Christmas songs and that kind of thing?

AB: Yes.

JW: Did you make special candies and cakes, anything?

AB: Well, Momma did. She would make all the cakes. She did all the cooking.

JW: When did you learn how to cook?

AB: Who me? I was about twenty-four years old (Chuckles) before I knew how to cook.

JW: Who taught you?

AB: Well, I got a cookbook, The Royal Cookbook, and I learned how to cook that way. Because Momma never let me cook...only to make cakes or cookies, 'cause I used to have friends over and I'd make cakes or cookies.

JW: Did they do anything special on birthdays?

AB: Oh, yes. We always celebrated everybody's birthday. We always had a birthday cake and ice cream.

JW: And did you have the neighbors in or anything like that?

AB: Yes. Oh, yes, we have the neighbors. 'Cause when I was sixteen I was going for Walter Lindley[?] and we had...He was a White fellow 'cause I didn't know no colored boys...I used to go with mostly all White boys at the time. And Walter Lindley, he came over. And he brought the ice cream, and Mother made the cake for my sixteenth birthday.

JW: Was that a special event? Did you have a début or something?

AB: No, I didn't have no début.

JW: Did other girls have débuts?

AB: Oh, just a few. Not many. After...that was way after I got to know the Negroes...after Reverend Byers came down. That's when I got acquainted with the Negroes.

JW: How about the Italian and the Irish girls? Did they have débuts?

AB: No. Uh-huh, no they didn't. We all just played together and went on about our business.

JW: Did you have a nickname?

AB: No.

JW: No?

AB: No. Oh, my cousin called me...Zeke, my cousin...called me Sally.

JW: Why was that?

AB: I don't know why. He always called me Sally.

JW: How would you say that your parents were different from one another?

AB: They weren't no different than anybody else. They were just plain, ordinary parents, and they treated all the children nicely.

JW: I mean how were they different from one another? How was your mother different from your father?

AB: Well, they seemed to have...they didn't have a whole lot of arguments or nothing. They got along very well together.

JW: Well, was one of them more outgoing than the other...more talkative than the other?

AB: Oh, Momma was. Oh, yes. My mother...See, my father was Baptist and he didn't even know how to dance. My mother taught him how to dance. She said she wasn't going to be married to nobody that couldn't dance. (Laughter) See, my grandfather was a deacon of the Third Baptist Church. And the glass...that's why I hated to see the Third Baptist Church move from Hyde and Clay, because that was much more valuable land. And all the glass that was donated on the Clay Street side was given by my grandfather.

JW: It was stained glass?

AB: Stained glass, windows. My grandfather donated that.

JW: If your father was Baptist, then what was your mother?

AB: Methodist.

JW: She was a Methodist? The Baptists didn't permit dancing and the Methodists did?

AB: I don't know if they permitted it or not. But I know...

END TAPE

[This is a make-up interview for the second side of Tape 1 of October 17, 1978. This phase was completed on January 25, 1979.]

JW: One of the questions that we didn't get to that was not picked up on the tape last time...we need to go back and discuss your elementary and high school days. So you said you went to Winfield Scott [which] was your first school?

AB: Yes.

JW: Where is that located?

AB: Well, at the time it was located on Lombard between Broderick and Baker.

JW: And were you the only Black child in the school?

AB: Well, my...no, they were older. My brothers went there.

JW: Were there any problems, racial problems?

AB: Oh, no. No.

JW: Not at all?

AB: No.

JW: Did you remember any of your teachers from this period?

AB: Only one I remember is Mrs. Hogan. She was redheaded.

JW: What do you remember her for?

AB: She was...she was...she taught at the last grade of the school because it only went to the fifth grade...fourth or fifth. And then I...we transferred and I had to go to Yerba Buena.

JW: Okay. What was your favorite subject in elementary school?

AB: Oh, spelling and arithmetic.

JW: Were you good in it?

AB: Yes, I was very good in spelling and arithmetic.

JW: Did you all have spelling contests?

AB: Oh, yes. We had spelling contests and we used to take examinations. They would line you up on the...line you up and we didn't write on paper, you know, examinations. And sometimes we would just have all examinations.

JW: Did you ever get any prizes or anything like that?

AB: Oh, no. They just skipped me from the seventh grade to the eighth.

JW: Oh, you skipped from the sixth to the eighth?

AB: No, from the seventh to the eighth grade. I was in the...yes, I was in low seventh and they skipped me to the low eighth.

JW: What kinds of books did you read when you were very small?

AB: Well, mostly children's books. I didn't read...I didn't read too much.

JW: Did you like to read?

AB: Yes, I didn't read not too...not very much. I don't care for reading too much. My...after I got older I mostly was sewing. I did a lot of sewing.

JW: Did you ever consider becoming a fashion designer?

AB: No, I never did.

JW: What did you hope to become when you grew up?

AB: Oh, just sewing and I applied and I got a position.

JW: Did you ever think of going into business for yourself or that kind of thing?

AB: No.

JW: Well, you went to high school at Galileo?

AB: Galileo. I was the first Negro to go to Galileo.

JW: Do you remember anything special about your high school years? What do you remember about those?

AB: Well, it was prominently White and I went around...well, if it wasn't for one thing, I would have been on the honor roll the first year but I got a 'C' in...(microphone slips)

JW: You said if it wasn't for one thing. What was it?

AB: Well, I got a 'C' in it, and that was Spanish. I didn't...I couldn't do very good in Spanish because in those...

JW: Why not?

AB: I don't know. It was just...because we had been speaking English all the time and I had never taken up Spanish before. So that was ...it was my beginning of taking up Spanish.

JW: Did you play any sports in high school?

AB: No.

JW: What did you do in your free time?

AB: In my free time? Well, I sewed and I...and I helped around the house.

JW: Did you go out with boys before you met Mr. Klingel?

AB: Oh, yes. Yes, that was...oh, yes.

JW: What kind...where would you all go on a date?

AB: Well, that was after I got acquainted with...with some Negroes... and then, you know, and I came over the hill because I had never came over the hill before.

JW: Over which hill?

AB: The Fillmore hill.

JW: Oh, okay.

AB: (Chuckle) Because we were down in Cow Hollow and we mostly stayed down that way and...

JW: So you met most of these people through church or how?

AB: No. I...Yes, I went to the Third Baptist Church. I met quite a few people and then I went...Yes, that's where I met them. Then I went over to A.M.E. Zion Church. That's where I met Josephine Cole. And then...and then she was Josephine...

JW: Foreman.

AB: Foreman. And then I told my mother and she said, "Oh, yes," she knew Mr. Foreman. It seemed that everybody knew Joe Foreman. And then I went...and that's how I got acquainted with the Negroes.

JW: But you dated White as well as Black fellows, right?

AB: Oh, yes.

JW: But I was trying to find out, you know, when you went out with somebody, where would you go, what would you do?

AB: Well, the only place we went was to a theater and then have dinner or something like that. Everybody went to the theater...to the show.

JW: Did you...could you go to any restaurant in the City?

AB: Well, I never had no complications with going to a restaurant. Some people said they did but I never had any. No, we went to the restaurants and had dinner and I don't see where they...where people say they had. There was no discrimination to my knowledge.

JW: What about...who were some of your favorite movie stars?

AB: Oh, Valentino at the time. (Chuckle). Yes, Valentino.

JW: What about women?

AB: Well, we just...I just...I didn't...I didn't care too much for the shows. Some of the shows I liked very well. The Western pictures I didn't care for.

JW: Did you...did you go to any live stage, theater productions?

AB: Yes. Oh, yes. I used to go with...I met...Tabitha Anderson who was the first Negro lawyer. She and I...we were kind of companions and we used to go see Shakespeare plays.

JW: Where was that?

AB: At the Curran Theater. She and I would.

JW: Do you ever see any of the all-Black musicals?

AB: Yes. What was that that came to town and Merry was in it... Merry Richards. She was a toe dancer in it. Shuffle...was it "Shuffle Along"?

JW: It might have been that. I've heard of another one called "Run Little Children" or something like that.

AB: I went...I went...I went to see "Shuffle Along" I'm quite sure.

JW: What did you think of it?

AB: It was very good. That was the first Negro play that I had seen because they were mostly from the East and I went to the Curran Theater to see it.

JW: Did they have minstrel shows here?

AB: Yes, they did have some minstrels.

JW: Did you go to those?

AB: Yes, once in a while, yes.

JW: You didn't feel embarrassed by them?

AB: No.

JW: You said you liked to dance a lot. Where would you go to dance?

AB: Well, they used to have the Oakwood Ball and they used to have the ...the Elks used to have a lot of dances and my uncle, Henry Thomas, was a...the treasurer of the Elks. He would tell me that they were going to have a dance and we would go to the dances.

JW: Would you always have to have a chaperon or not?

AB: No, it used to be a bunch of us girls and boys get together and we'd all go in one group and my uncle would see to it that everything was all right.

JW: What kind of dances did you use to do?

AB: We used to do the one step and two step and we used to do the Shodders. The Shanghai Shodders and...

JW: The what? The Shanghai what? (Chuckle)

AB: (Chuckle) Yes. The Shodders. It was the Shodders. The Shanghai Shodders. And what else? What are the dances we did? We'd Walk Like Billy and things like...the dances of that age.

JW: Did you do any of the slow dances up close or did your parents let you do that?

AB: No, I didn't do much of that slow dance, no. See, everybody...oh, we did the waltzes. Yes, the waltz, one step, two step and then we had the Shodders and we mostly had a...we mostly did have a chaperon sometimes. 'Cause one of the mothers would go.

JW: What...were you easily...were you a person that was hot tempered?

AB: No, not much. No, no fights.

JW: Was there anything that would get you upset easily? At any time do you remember being very angry?

AB: Well, they used to tease me a lot.

JW: Who?

AB: My brothers and my cousins, they would tease me. That was about the only time I would get angry, you know, and kind of upset.

JW: What about people that weren't in your family? Was it anything, you know, that would happen sometimes when you were away from home? Do you remember any incident?

AB: No, not that I know of because we weren't around too many people.

JW: What about when somebody wanted to make you especially happy? Was there anything that they always knew would make you happy?

AB: Well, mostly it was going to the dances would be my favorite.

JW: Were you considered a real smart dresser since you made your own clothes, or did you make your own clothes?

AB: Yes, I made my own clothes.

JW: And what patterns did you use or how did you decide what you were going to use?

AB: Well, some of them were made without a pattern, and some of them were made with a pattern, and the dressmaker would fit them for me. I had quite a number of dresses.

JW: Were you known for your clothes?

AB: Yes. People used to like the idea of the designs I used to wear, and I was always very neat about my clothes.

JW: Was there anybody particularly well-known that you patterned your clothes after?

AB: Well, sometimes I would see something at I. Magnin's, and I would copy some of their patterns, their ideas.

JW: Did you feel that by being a girl you were at a disadvantage in some way in the world, that this was a man's world and that you were kept down by some in any way?

AB: No, I didn't see that way about it because by having so many brothers, I never felt that way. I have four brothers.

JW: But you know there's a lot of discussion about women's liberation and people talk about how women were kept down in your day. Did you feel that?

AB: No, I didn't feel too much because I didn't go out like other people did all the time. And then my mother and father, a lot of the times when I did go to the dances, my mother and father would go with me and then my brother, my older brother, he was my protection. He always was with me. So I was kind of sheltered by the family... having so much family.

JW: If you had to live the first thirty years of your life over again, is there anything you would change?

AB: Oh, yes! With all the opportunities like these children have now, oh, I would...I really would have been different. I would've taken up all of these courses and all of this opportunity they have, I really would have changed.

JW: But what about even if that couldn't happen? Do you think that you made some bad decisions in the early part of your life that you would change? Do you think that you might have gone to college or not, and not to get married earlier, or later or to a different person, or anything along that line?

AB: Well, I was never in a hurry to get married. I was always having such a good time I never thought about marriage, and then I decided not to think anything about marriage. So they said I was going to be an old maid. (Chuckle) Then I said, "Oh, well, I'll just have to be an old maid".

JW: Did you stay in Third Baptist Church once you became an adult?

AB: That was when I was younger. I went to the Third Baptist Church quite a bit. I used to go to Sunday School a lot at the Third Baptist Church, and then by being with the...the White people and Italians all the time, I started to go to the Catholic, and then I turned out ...turned to be Catholic.

JW: When did that happen?

AB: Gee, when did I turn Catholic? I turned Catholic in my later years. I was about nineteen or twenty when I turned Catholic.

JW: Did it bother your parents that you had started to another church?

AB: No. My mother never bothered us about our religion because mostly all the family turned Catholic because I had turned Catholic. Even my mother turned Catholic.

JW: Why?

AB: I don't know. We just all went Catholic.

JW: I mean...what do you see as the difference between the Catholic church and Protestant...the Black Protestant churches?

AB: Well, what difference? Well, I didn't like all that holl...shouting and hollering. That got me kind of nervous and upset. They [the people at the Catholic church] were very nice to me. I used to go with these Italian girls...Italian girls and we all would go to church together...to Mass.

JW: Which church did you go to?

AB: When I first started out? Well, I went down here to Green and Fillmore. That's Saint...I can't remember.

JW: Well, we can put that in later.

AB: Yes.

JW: Do you attend church regularly now?

AB: Yes, I go to Mass quite often. Yes, I go pretty good.

JW: Do you consider yourself a good Catholic?

AB: Well, no. I don't consider myself a good Catholic because I don't attend regularly all the time.

JW: Do you believe most of the teachings of the church?

AB: Well, since it has changed, some of the things I don't care for.

JW: Like what?

AB: Well, it is very different now. It's not in Latin like it used to be. It is in English which we can understand what they are talking about and it seems a little bit closer. We have a little bit more closeness to us in the Catholic church.

JW: You mean between members or...?

AB: Between the members. Yes. There's more closeness.

JW: Do you think that churches in general have contributed something to the community?

AB: Oh, yes. I think the churches have. And I visit the other churches.

JW: What do you think they have contributed to the community?

AB: Well, it makes an improvement on some of the people.

JW: You mean their morals?

AB: Their morals, yes. Their morals are much improved.

JW: What about in terms of helping the community improve its economic situation and so forth?

AB: Well, it seems to me that we are building too many churches, and not enough improvement on other things. Now all the money that they have spent, they haven't even got one good restaurant. They haven't improved on getting a hotel and everytime we have something we have to go to the Whites to have an affair, and I think that we should build a place where we could have our own entertainment. We have to pay so much...six hundred and seven hundred dollars a night to rent a place, and it's always a White place we have to go to... a White hotel. And I think if we have to spend all that money, they could have taken the money and had a place built where we all could entertain ourselves.

JW: Did you belong to the NAACP?

AB: Well, in a sense I did but that was with the group.

JW: What group?

AB: The Native Daughters I belonged to.

JW: What does the Native Daughters do? I've heard of them. I've met a few but I'm not sure what they do. How did they get started, and what kind of activities are they involved in?

AB: What activities? Well, they don't do much. They don't give no scholarships or anything. They just have the meetings and then we do give out baskets of groceries for Thanksgiving and for Christmas time for the needy families. We go to the schools and find a needy family, and we give baskets of groceries and baskets for the two holidays. If we have to help somebody, we give a donation.

JW: What do you feel that you get out of being a Native Daughter?

AB: Being a Native Daughter? Well, to my explanation it's just like anything else. Whatever country, city or state you belong to, you're just born there, that's all. And I don't emphasize on being so particular about I am a native. It happened that I was born here. And I get along very well with people because it was a different trend to me when I saw so many Negroes coming because it hadn't been any Negroes here. But I got along with them all right. San Francisco was just a city with no Negroes for a while...very few Negroes.

JW: Were you in the Native Daughters from the beginning?

AB: No, I was not.

JW: How did you get in?

AB: One friend of mine asked me to join, and I joined and since then I have resigned from the Native Daughters because they weren't doing too much so I have resigned from the Native Daughters.

JW: Did you ever join any other clubs?

AB: Well, we did have one good social club here at one time, but it died out and that was the Cosmos Club. That was one of the first clubs in San Francisco. My mother and father belonged to it, but at that time they didn't let younger people join, but later on I joined. I got older and I was in the Native Daughters.

JW: What did the Cosmos Club do?

AB: They only gave one big affair a year. It was a dance affair. A formal affair, and that's all the Cosmos Club did. And they used to have to rent a place to have the affair.

JW: Do you remember hearing anything about Marcus Garvey when you were coming up?

AB: Not much. I didn't hear much about Marcus Garvey.

JW: What sort of relationship would you say that the police have with the people of San Francisco? What kind of attitude did people have about the police?

AB: Well, we didn't have many policemen when I was coming up.

JW: You had some. You just didn't notice them. (Chuckle)

AB: (Chuckle) We had some and detectives and all, but they never bothered us.

JW: But you don't remember them being a problem?

AB: No.

JW: You weren't afraid of them?

AB: No. Oh, no. No. Why should I be afraid of a policeman? I didn't do anything.

JW: What did you think when the Depression came in the Thirties?

AB: Oh, that was terrible.

JW: What affect did it have on you and your family?

AB: Well, you lost everything then. And, you see, at that time they didn't have no insurance on the banks, and what you lost, you just lost, and you never got it back.

JW: Did you lose something?

AB: No. Well, my mother did, because I was young, and it just went and you never did get your money back.

JW: Did you have to move or did you have to change what you ate or how did it...?

AB: No. No. No, we ate...we ate pretty good because we grew our own vegetables and things were much cheaper. Meat was so cheap...it was a little different than what it is now. See, we didn't have no welfare. We didn't have anything.

JW: Do you remember, when you think about the Thirties, do you think of yourself as suffering? I mean, do you see it as being a real hard time or just how do you see it?

AB: Yes, it was a pretty hard time for people right then. Very hard. It was a very hard time for people to get along. After the Depression, it was Franklin D. Roosevelt, he was the one that made jobs and he was the one got the Social Security going and he was the one that put up insurance on all banks. See, we didn't have no insurance on banks. You just put your money in it that was it. A lot of people didn't believe in putting money in banks. They would have a tin can or something and they would bury it. They would hide their money. A lot of them didn't trust the bank. So if you had money in the bank, you just lost it. And that's why we had so many suicides and different things because people were used to banks, and when the Depression came and they lost, they knew they wouldn't get their money back. They couldn't get no money, well, they just jumped into the Bay or something. They committed suicide.

JW: What happened when the War broke out? You were married when the War came in, right? Then you had a baby?

AB: Oh, no. Not then. No, I wasn't married in World War I. No.

JW: Two. World War II.

AB: Was I married in WW II? Oh, yes, I was married in World War II but I didn't go to work.

JW: You didn't work in the shipyards then?

AB: No, I didn't work in the shipyards. A lot of them went to shipyards.

JW: What did you do during the War?

AB: Well, I helped over at the nursery school.

JW: Oh, that's right.

AB: Yes, for the working mothers.

JW: After the War was over, what happened? Did you quit the nursery school job?

AB: No, I stayed for a while longer because the mothers were still... they got used to working and so the mothers kept on working. Just like they have the childcare centers now, see. So the mothers were still working.

JW: Your daughter's name was?

AB: Sandra.

JW: Sandra?

AB: Yes.

JW: Did she go to public school or private school?

AB: No, she went to St. Dominick's. She went to the Catholic schools. She graduated from the Catholic.

JW: Did she go on to college?

AB: No, she didn't.

JW: What did she decide to do?

AB: Well, she got married and had children of her own now. Now, after the children got older, she did take up some courses.

JW: In what?

AB: I don't know what kind of courses she had taken up but she's working now because all her children are pretty big.

JW: What is her husband's name?

AB: George. George Coubson.

JW: How do you spell it?

AB: G-e...George. Coubson, C-o-u-b-s-o-n. They are separated.

JW: Is he a native Californian?

AB: No, he's from Texas.

JW: (Chuckle) Your family can't seem to get away from those Texans, huh?

AB: (Chuckle) Well, the Texas people all came here.

JW: What does he do for a living?

AB: Well, he was supposed to be going to college. We wanted him to go to college. We didn't want them to get married at all. Because I thought she was just a little too young to get married, and wanted her to go on to school because my husband had saved the money for her to go to college, 'cause college wasn't expensive as it is now. But they got married and they started raising a family.

JW: How many grandchildren do you have?

AB: Seven!

JW: They have seven children?

AB: Seven children! She said you don't know, Mama, how unhappy it is to be an only child.

JW: Oh, did she feel that?

AB: Yes, she felt that way.

JW: Why do you think she felt that way?

AB: Because she was just brought up by herself. I only had the one.

JW: What about the neighbor's children? Did she have playmates?

AB: Well, oh, yes. She had a lot of playmates and things, but it's still not having a brother or a sister living in the house.

JW: Some people think that only children are lucky because they get everything that their parents have to give.

AB: Yes, they do get that, but even so, they do need a companion. They really do because I know by us having six children in the house, it was much more congenial. They get into arguments but it is more fun having brothers and sisters around. You can play games and different things.

JW: What have you been doing...just to fill in for the people who will be reading the interview...what have you been doing the last fifteen or twenty years? Did your husband die...Mr. Brooks?

AB: Oh, yes. He had cancer. He passed away.

JW: How long ago?

AB: About six years ago.

JW: And when did you move here?

AB: Well, when the doctor said I couldn't climb the stairs...I had a nice apartment...when the doctor said I couldn't climb the stairs on account of my heart, I came here...before my husband died.

JW: That's been about seven or eight years?

AB: Yes, I've been here about six years.

JW: And have you had a chance to travel or what do you like to do with your time now?

AB: Well, right now I'm not doing anything. I did some volunteer work.

JW: Where?

AB: I belong to the RSVP and the Jewish Community Center. And I belong to the center down there. But there's not much an older person can do.

JW: Do you have any plans to do any traveling?

AB: Oh, I did go back to Washington, D.C.

JW: How did you like it?

AB: Oh, fine.

JW: I hope you didn't go in the summertime.

AB: Yes, I did. It was too hot!

JW: That's my hometown.

AB: Washington, D.C.? Hm-m-m. Sure is...

JW: Hot and crowded because everybody goes back in the summertime.

AB: I did go to Honolulu...the Hawaiian Islands. My cousin is in New York, in Staten Island. I went to visit her.

JW: Is there any place that you would like to go?

AB: Now?

JW: Yes.

AB: Well, I don't want to go across the Atlantic Ocean. No, I don't want to go over in the foreign countries. They don't interest me. There's not much more traveling I would like to do.

JW: Have you had any contacts with your inlaws in Columbia?

AB: My daughter lives back there. That's where I went. I went to visit my daughter.

JW: In Columbia?

AB: Washington, D.C.?

JW: No, no. Not District of Columbia. Your first husband's...

AB: Oh, no, no, no. I never went there.

JW: Are you in touch with any of his relatives?

AB: No, no.

JW: Well, I think that since we have over two and a half hours, that we'll bring things to a close. Thank you.

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[The flip side of Tape 1 is inaudible, so the transcribing is being picked up on Tape 2.]

JW: Did you feel any pressure to get married between eighteen and twenty-four?

AB: No, I was having a good time! What did I want to get married for? (Chuckle)

JW: I mean, your parents didn't say, "Alma, don't you think it's time?"

AB: No. Someone hollered about I was going to be an Old Maid...because I never thought about getting married. I said, "Well, what is there to get married for when you have a nice home and you have a lot of friends?"

JW: What made you decide to get married?

AB: My brother. (Chuckle)

JW: How did he have so much influence on you?

AB: Well, he was my pet brother. Him and I always ran around together.

JW: You're talking about Daniel?

AB: Dan, yes. We went around together.

JW: So you must have married a friend of his.

AB: No, I did not. I married a South American. I'll show you Dan's picture...of when he got married. That's the only one I have. [Interruption]

JW: What was your first husband's name?

AB: Segundo Vicente Klingel. [?]

JW: That's an odd name.

AB: Well, it's Klingeldorfer, but we took the -dorfer off. It's German. His family is Spanish and German and Negro. And he spoke...He's from Columbia, South America. And he spoke five languages. But he learned English after he came to America.

JW: Why did he come here?

AB: Working, I guess.

JW: Was he a seaman?

AB: Yes, a seaman.

JW: How did you meet him?

AB: I don't know. I met him through my brother.

JW: What was it that impressed you about him?

AB: Well, he was very...he acted like a very gentle...he acted gentlemanly. He was very nice.

JW: How long did you go out with him before you got married?

AB: Well, not too long [before] we got married. Because my mother was sick at the time. And my brother said Segundo was down the street and so he went and got him. We run him back and I told my mother that...I said, "Well, here's your son-in-law." He didn't...the man didn't even ask me. I just told...(Laughter) I told my mother, I said, "Well, here's your son-in-law." And then she was happy, because she didn't want to pass away and not see me married. So I said, "Well, here's your son-in-law." And she wanted some flowers and he went all over looking for flowers and the stores weren't open on Sunday. But the next day she went into a coma and he brought, oh, he brought the biggest bouquet of flowers to her. But he was at the hospital to see my mother...and I said any man that would do a thing like that and me saying that I was going to be his wife and he didn't even ask me, I said well we were going to get married. And we did get married. We got married twice. The first year we got married and the next year we got married again.

JW: Why?

AB: Well, he wanted to make it real legal. He wanted to be sure that we were married.

JW: I mean, were you married once civilly and once in the church, or what?

AB: No, we were married by the judge both times. We went to Oakland one time to get married, the first time. We took my brother and a girlfriend of mine. We went to Oakland. And they...

JW: Where was your father?

AB: Oh, my father passed a long time ago. He died when he was forty-five. And then we got married and then we went around...[when] we got married the second time, we went down to Redwood City and got married.

JW: So you had two marriage licenses?

AB: Yes. I married the same person twice.

JW: I still don't understand why.

AB: Well, he wanted it that way. That was just his idea.

JW: Did he think you were going to run away or something?

AB: (Chuckle) We got married twice.

JW: And how long were you married?

AB: Twenty years.

JW: And did you have children by that marriage?

AB: Yes. That girl right there. [Refers to a nearby mounted photograph.] See that girl in the corner? Well, that's his daughter. Now those are his sister's children back there, but you wouldn't think they were the same [family]. Those are her cousins. They live in South America. That's Carmencita's children.

JW: Did any of the rest of his family come to the United States?

AB: No. He did want to bring his brother over, who was a radio technican. He told him he wanted to bring him to marry my sister, because my sister wasn't married yet. He wanted everything in the family.

JW: Was that a Columbian custom?

AB: (Laugh)

JW: Did you ever go visit his family?

AB: No.

JW: What kind of work was he able to get?

AB: Oh, he worked in the warehouse. Because he spoke different languages and he was over the men. Because he could speak five languages. He spoke Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, German and Italian. Then he learned English. That was six languages.

JW: What was his educational background?

AB: Oh, he had a pretty good education because they start their children over there to learn a trade when they are ten years old. So he was a watch repairman.

JW: Was he from...what is the capital of Columbia, Bogotá?

AB: I don't know which part he was [from]...but I know he was from Columbia. He came over here on a ship. He worked on the ship to get to America.

JW: What did your friends think about your husband?

AB: They all liked him! But they couldn't understand him when he talked. (Chuckle)

JW: Well, could you?

AB: Yes, I understood him.

JW: Did you ever learn any Spanish?

AB: I learned a little Spanish. But not like him. Over here we don't speak...we don't have an accent like they do. We learn more words. But they have the accent.

JW: Were you ever...did you ever consider yourself fluent in any other language besides English?

AB: No.

JW: Well, what happened? After twenty years, you separated.

AB: Well, I stayed single for a while. This here other fellow, Brooks, he had been watching me for years, and he never had the courage to ask to go with me. And then after I had gotten divorced and everything...and then he had nerve enough to ask to go with me and we went together and we got married. But I didn't get married right away. We got the license in Reno in June...we were going to get married in June. And it was such a long line. And then we decided... Well, I said, "Oh, I'm not going to change my name from Klingel to Brooks". And I didn't get married. And we didn't get married until December. I waited. I said I'll make up my mind.

JW: Why didn't you have a church wedding any of those times?

AB: Oh, because I didn't. Well, I didn't have no father. And in those days everybody wasn't making so much money...Money went further than it does now. But people weren't making as much money as they are. You see, then San Francisco turned into a union city. Everybody got union wages and everything went up. Even the taxes were cheap. You could buy a house and only pay ten dollars a year on taxes on your house.

JW: What was your second husband's name?

AB: Alonzo.

JW: Was he Spanish, too?

AB: No, Negro. He was from Texas. My mother always told me not to marry anybody from Texas. (Laughter)

JW: Why did she say that?

AB: She always thought Texas people were bad. And I married a Texas man. Um-mmm! I guess she'd turn over in her grave if she knew I married a Texas man. We stayed married seventeen years. He got cancer of the lungs and that's what killed him...cancer of the lungs. He smoked too much. And he was on the boat. He ran on the boats. He was a seaman.

JW: What were the grounds for your first divorce, I mean for your divorce?

AB: I just got mad one day, and said I was going to divorce him. And he didn't think it...It was our anniversary date too! We had been married exactly twenty years on that day. He said something to me and I got mad at him and I said I was going to divorce from him and he didn't believe it. And I went down to the lawyer's office and put in for a divorce.

JW: But you had to sue on some grounds.

AB: What did I say?...But he spoke very nice to the lawyer...to the judge about me: He said she was a wonderful housekeeper and she kept the house beautiful. And my meals were always on time. And he said, "I never had to wait for my meals".

JW: So why did he let you go so easily?

AB: Well, we tried...well, I don't know. We tried. We tried. After we started our divorce we started to go around together again. Then I said, "Oh, no." I wasn't going to get married again to him. I just let...we just separated. You know they [Latins] have very fiery dispositions. They have very fiery dispositions.

JW: Did you feel that you were...Did you consult each other about big decisions? Or did he make most of the big decisions about where to live or what to buy...?

AB: No. No. When I had the baby the first thing he said...we were renting a flat...and the first thing he did was to go around and look for a house to buy. So he bought two flats. He said, "My baby wasn't going to be raised in no rent house"...that's what he used to say, "rent house". So he bought this house for me. And nothing was too good...He never even cashed his paychecks. He would sign it, and always gave me the paycheck. I did all the maneuvering.

JW: Your girlfriends must have been jealous. (Laughter)

AB: That's what started it. See, we hadn't been going around with colored people. I went around with the Spanish. And then, so, he handed me the check...And the men said, "You don't give your wife your paycheck like that! And you don't buy flowers!" (He always bought flowers or a box of candy on Saturday. He always brought that home.) And they said, "You don't give your wife the paycheck. You cash your paycheck and you give her so much." And that's why I always said, "I should never run around with a bunch of Negroes, because they spoiled it for me." They always said, "You don't do that! In America, you don't do that." And then he got it into his head that he shouldn't do these things. See, when I went on a vacation with the baby, he always had a present on the dining room table when I came home. And they said...And if he wanted...now if he wanted a car, he went out and bought himself...got himself a job and made extra money to buy his car. He wouldn't take none of the household money.

JW: Were you working during most of these years?

AB: Well, I started into work afterwards. No, I wanted to go put my baby in nursery school. Everybody was putting their children in a nursery school, so I said, "Well, I'll put my baby in, because she's by herself." So they said, "Oh..." So I paid the fee and everything and they said "Oh, you got to work". I said, "Work?". "Yes, you can't put the baby in nursery school unless you work." That was during the wartime. And so they gave me a job down there. I did some sewing and different things around the nursery.

JW: Where was the nursery?

AB: Frederick Burke Nursery. It belonged to [San Francisco] State College. That's where they teach the nursery school teachers. And then Mrs. Messer [?] wanted me to take up...go to college and be a dietician. I told her that I didn't want to be a dietician...I'd like to, but I had my house and I had my baby to keep clean.

JW: Who told you...who suggested that you go?

AB: Mrs. Leontine Messer.[?]

JW: Who was she?

AB: She was over the nursery school. She was teaching all these colored...That's how all these colored girls got in the nursery schools, because they had a school to teach them to be nursery school teachers, to take care of the children, while their mothers were at work.

JW: And this was during the War years?

AB: Yes.

JW: Before we go on, let's turn back a little bit to the family history. We'll start with your mother's side of the family. What was your mother's name?

AB: Well, my great-grandmother's name was Talbert.[?] Her name was Talbert and she had a daughter name Jane. Jane got married and she married a Hopper. Ed Hopper, Edward Hopper she married.

JW: Talbert. That's your mother's mother's mother?

AB: Yes.

JW: And was she a slave?

AB: No.

JW: Where was she born and raised?

AB: In Philadelphia. She was half Indian and half Dutch. She was no slave.

JW: And she married a Black man?

AB: A Jamaican. Yes.

JW: Was this the family that moved to California?

AB: Yes. And she brought Jane. Because Grandma Jane had married Ed Hopper and they all came out together, in a covered wagon.

JW: Why did they come all this distance?

AB: Oh, everybody was coming to California. They struck gold and everybody was coming to California.

JW: They came...

AB: 1852.

JW: Where is the first place they...Did they tell you about anything that happened on the trip out?

AB: No, I didn't know that part about it because my great-grandmother was dead then, and my grandmother had died...

JW: I was just assuming they must have taken a train or something to Missouri and <u>then</u> got in a covered wagon.

AB: I don't know if they went that way or not. But I know they came from Philadelphia out here.

JW: Because it seemed to have been cheaper or easier to take a ship and go around the Horn or something.

AB: Oh, yes. It was terrible. A lot of people came right straight in the covered wagons.

JW: They did?

AB: Yes.

JW: Where did they settle in California?

AB: Vallejo and Hyde.

JW: They came directly to San Francisco?

AB: Yes. They settled in Vallejo and Hyde.

JW: Why didn't they go to the gold country? Is that what they came out here for, to find gold?

AB: I don't know why they came out here...but they came out here to see California. And she was tall and stately, with beautiful black hair. I wish I had a picture of her. And my grandmother's name was Jane Hopper. She married Ed Hopper.

JW: What was his background?

AB: I didn't know nothing about Ed Hopper.

JW: And what did they do when they got out here? How did they make a living?

AB: I guess they worked. They must have worked, because a lot of people were working in those days?

JW: They didn't do any mining at all?

AB: No.

JW: They didn't do any farming?

AB: No. The whole place was nothing but a farm. (Chuckle). That's all it was: sand dunes and farm, and water. Because, you see, the water came all the way up from...the Embarcadero wasn't even...that was water.

JW: The what? Oh, Embarca dero.

AB: Yes. The water was all the way up to...the Bay was all the way up to the Palace Hotel...that was all water. The rest is made-land. Where we lived, the land in Cow Hollow, the water went all the way up to Chestnut Street. And all that is all made-land.

JW: When was that filled in, for the Exposition?

AB: Yes.

JW: Do you remember them doing that?

AB: Yes, because we could look...we were on a hill. Grandpa's house was on the hill on Greenwich and we could look down.

JW: Where did they bring the dirt from?

AB: I don't know where. Well, there was alot of dirt around all over.

JW: So they would just level a hill and fill in the Bay?

AB: They filled in the Bay...because I know...before all of that filled in, I used to go rowing in the Bay before it got filled in, after school. We used to go rowing.

JW: Do you remember going to the Exposition?

AB: Oh, yes.

JW: What was it like?

AB: Oh, it was all right. Just like a fair. But Uncle Bud, he was a supervisor in the Post Office. Uncle Bud used to give me money, but he said the boys would have to make their own money to go to the fair. I told you they favored me all the time. I was the first girl born.

JW: You must have been spoiled.

AB: Yes.

JW: Is that what people said?

AB: Yes. See, my aunt and Mrs. Avery wanted to adopt me, because she said Momma had too many children. But no, no. She [Momma] said, "You can't adopt my only girl. No, Emma Avery."

JW: How many children did the Hopper family have?

AB: They had four. They had Martha, Estelle, Gertrude and Emma.

JW: And which one was your mother?

AB: Gertrude was my mother.

JW: And when was your mother born?

AB: January 20, 1878.

JW: And did she get an education?

AB: Yes. Oh, yes. She was the one that did the artist work and the vocalist. She was adopted by my...her mother had children. She was adopted by her sister, Lydia Frances,[?]who was a dressmaker.

JW: She was adopted by...?

AB: By her aunt, Lydia Frances.

JW: Why was she adopted?

AB: Well, that was her favorite. She picked her, and she just...See, my grandmother had the other girls and one of the girls she said... Oh, I tell you why she was adopted: Because Herbert, my uncle Herbert, Cousin Herbert, he got drowned in the Russian River. She [Lydia Frances] had two boys. One named Eugene Frances and the other one was Herbert.

JW: And she just felt that she wanted another child?

AB: Yes. So she adopted my mother.

JW: So how did your mother get her artist and musical training?

AB: Aunt Lydia, Grandma, paid for her tuitions to take all these things ...finishing.

JW: She sang? She didn't play an instrument?

AB: No.

JW: What kind of music?

AB: Well, she sang different arias and church songs. But she had a beautiful voice.

JW: Did she ever think of making a career of it?

AB: No. She just taken it up.

JW: Did she marry young?

AB: No. She was about twenty-four when she...(Chuckle). No, she had a happy life, and she was going to school, and she was taking art at the art school.

JW: Which art school was this?

AB: The San Francisco Art School, which is still here on Chestnut Street.

JW: How did she meet your father?

AB: Oh, at a church festival.

JW: Which church was this?

AB: I don't know which church it was because...There were only three churches in San Francisco at the time, and they all were on Powell Street...the Bethel, A.M.E. Zion and the Baptist. They all were on Powell Street.

JW: She met him at a festival?

AB: At one of the festivals.

JW: Now was he a native-born Californian?

AB: Oh, yes. My father was born here too.

JW: What was his background?

AB: His father was a West Indian.

JW: He's the one from Jamaica that married Winifred Brightwell?

AB: Yes, but Winifred Brightwell is from Virginia. The [his] boat stopped there and he met her and he used to write to her. Then they got married.

JW: What was his name?

AB: Grandpa's name was Zero Earl Thomas.

JW: Zero?

AB: Yes. Z-e-r-o. Earl Thomas. She married into the Thomas'...but he was from Jamaica.

JW: How did they happen to come to California? Winifred and Zero?

AB: Didn't Lillian [Raymond, a cousin and Project interviewee] tell you about that?

JW: Not much.

AB: 'Cause her mother was living at the time because she was my aunt. See, I don't...Lillian had...Aunt Minnie had a lot of the papers and I thought sure she would have told you...she had on that side.

JW: Well, I'll check with her about it. But Zero Thomas is your grandfather, right?

AB: Yes.

JW: Now they didn't come during the Gold Rush period then, they came later?

AB: A little later. But his children were born here. See, his first child was born here in 1878, September 22, the same year as my mother.

JW: What kind of work did he do for a living?

AB: Oh, he was a good cook. He cooked.

JW: Did he cook on ships or in hotels?

AB: In hotels. He was a very good cook.

JW: How many children did they have?

AB: They had six.

JW: And one of these was your father?

AB: Yes, my father. Let me see, there was Zee-Zero, one named after him...there was Zee, Robert Henry, my father...

JW: What was your father's name?

AB: Daniel.

JW: Oh, so your older brother was a "Junior".

AB: Yes.

JW: Zero, Robert, Henry, Daniel?

AB: Let me see...Zero, Robert, Henry, Daniel and then Mabel and Minnie. They had two girls. They had four boys and two girls.

JW: And when was your father born?

AB: My father? September 22, 1878.

JW: Oh, I see. He and your mother were about nine months apart.

AB: Yes.

JW: What kind of education did he have?

AB: You know he must have had a pretty good education because he could write beautiful. I don't know much about his education. But I know he was a beautiful writer, and he kept books good.

JW: Now he went on to become a chemist?

AB: Yes, he did chemistry.

JW: Do you know how he learned that?

AB: Well, he didn't go to college, I know, but he was taught by this here White fellow. (I can't think of his name.) He did chemistry work. And they worked together.

JW: Did he have military rank or did he work as a civilian?

AB: No, no. A civilian.

JW: What kinds of things were your parents interested in in terms of political activities? Were they members of clubs or lodges or anything like that?

AB: Well, Papa belonged to the Odd Fellows, I know that. Mama belonged to the Foresters and the Household of Ruth.

JW: What was the first one?

AB: The Foresters.

JW: What was the Foresters?

AB: Well, some kind of organization. 'Cause they had me in it when I was sixteen. And I didn't know...I saw all these old women and I told them I didn't want to belong to it...They were all old women. I thought I was going to meet some <u>young</u> people. I met all <u>old</u> people.

JW: What did the Household of Ruth do? Was that a church organization?

AB: No, that's kind of a club organization they had...Household of Ruth. I don't even hear about Household of Ruth anymore. But I think it was some part of Odd Fellows or Foresters or something... Household of Ruth.

JW: Did they ever talk about any run-ins they had with prejudice in San Francisco?

AB: No, they never spoke of any.

JW: What was your reaction to the people that came in during the War years...all of a sudden? You had grown up in a community where you could count the number of Negroes on your fingers and toes...?

AB: Well, I was standing...like the White folks, I was looking, wondering where all these people were coming from. I stood on a corner... Honest to goodness, I never saw so many! I said, "Where are all these people coming from?" 'Cause I had never seen, you know, so many Negroes.

JW: Did it frighten you?

AB: What?

JW: Were you frightened?

AB: Well...no. I just looked at them. And they...they weren't dressed like we were dressed, you know. Because when we...we always dressed up to go downtown and had on our white gloves and hats. And we always dressed going downtown. I wasn't used to seeing people with bandanas and...(Chuckle). I said, "Where did all these bandana people come from?" We never...we never dressed that way. 'Cause even when that child was a baby, I always dressed her in nice clothes and things, and she always wore white gloves when she went downtown, and a hat. She was always dressed.

JW: Did they behave any differently?

AB: Yes, they did. They made a lot of noise on the streetcars...um!

END TAPE

AB: They all wanted to be in one batch together. They didn't mingle.

JW: What about the native daughters and sons? Did they make any effort to welcome these people in, to integrate them into the city?

AB: Yes, they kind of...afterwards they kind of got together, somewhat. But you see, my mother and father had passed, and we didn't, you know, mingle too much. We were younger.

JW: What about at the Booker T. Washington Center, did you ever go there?

AB: Not much. No. The boys used to go, play basketball and stuff. But I never.

JW: I guess by this time you wouldn't need to go because by this time you were grown and with children by then.

AB: Yes.

JW: Your daughter was born when?

AB: My daughter was born in 1941, 'cause that's when we bought our property. Property was cheap!

JW: What did you buy?

AB: Two flats and the garage.

JW: And where was this?

AB: On Post and Divisadero.

JW: Did you live there all during the War?

AB: Oh, yes...because we had the place paid for. Gray's Undertaking Parlor bought it from us...Mr. White.

JW: What do you think of most of the other people who were old Californians, what was their reaction to the new Blacks that were coming in?

AB: Well, I didn't know too many of them either. Only thing I knew was Josephine Foreman and Mr. and Mrs. Joe Foreman and them, and I knew the Thompson girls and the Dereks, and then Erma Terrell.[?] Erma Terrell, she lived out in the Mission. She was one of the old timers. Gee, if I knew her address, you'd get a lot of history from her because she's got a good memory. And she's a native.

JW: I think I may have it somewhere.

AB: Erma Terrell. She's on Pearl Street. Yes, Erma Terrell. She's not a Terrell now.

JW: I think it's Reed now.

AB: Yes, Reed. Erma Reed. No, this was after that...she married again.

JW: Oh. I told you nobody in your generation married only once. (Chuckle)

AB: No. (Chuckle) Reed and her got a divorce 'cause she had two children. And now she's married to a White fellow. I don't know his name. But they live on Pearl Street. Ever so often I run into her.

JW: Well, maybe I'll be able to find her. Do you think things for Black people deteriorated or improved during and after the War?

AB: They improved in some ways and some ways it didn't. Because afterward, they got kind of...some of them weren't the type of people that were used to some of these things like we were.

JW: For example...

AB: Like going into restaurants and things. And if they didn't eat the food, they would take the food and mess it all up instead of just leaving it alone.

JW: Was it because it was a different style of cooking that they didn't like?

AB: Well, yes, I guess so, 'cause we never...I never heard of greens or nothing like that until the War time, because the only greens we ever ate were spinach and Swiss Chard. We never heard of mustard greens and turnip greens. And never heard of chiterlings, and never heard of pig ears and pig nose and all that (Chuckle). They said I didn't know what I was missing. I said, "I ain't missing nothing." I said, "We're used to eating artichokes and string beans and peas and carrots and rutabagas and cabbage, and things like that." We ate a little different from what they ate.

JW: Weren't there quite a few educated people coming in too, from Black colleges down South?

AB: Yes, but they have to go to college after they get here to get a position. Most of them have to take up a year's college [study] in California before they can get a job.

JW: Did the job situation for Black people improve during the War?

AB: Yes, it has improved. But Momma always used to say we didn't have no jobs. I said, "Yes, we did." I said, "I never worked in nobody's kitchen." I went and did dressmaking, my father did chemistry, and my brother, he worked at the insurance company. And what did my cousin do...Zeke? Oh, he was a boxer. Oh, he wanted to be a boxer. He did boxing for a while. Oh, yes, and he worked for the mattress company. Simmons.

JW: Were there any people in San Francisco before the Second World War that considered themselves sort of an "in" group..."society", or something like that?

AB: Yes, the Cosmos Club. Hm-m-mp!

JW: What was their criteria for getting in?

AB: Well, if you weren't up-to-the-minute, you couldn't join the Cosmos Club. And if you were real young you couldn't join it. You had to be a certain age to join it. Because when my mother and father were in it, I couldn't be in the Cosmos Club at that time.

JW: Did you have to be light-skinned to be in it?

AB: No. No. No.

JW: Well, who couldn't get in it?

AB: Well, the people that did a lot of drinking and cursing...you know, the lower class.

JW: There were so few Black people here, I'm trying to understand, how could you tell one class from another? Was it the job, or what?

AB: Well...It wasn't their job situation. It's their behavior. Some of them would go fighting. Some of them used to carry guns and knives and things and go to fighting. 'Cause I know we went on the boat ride and we thought it was going to be nice. My mother took us children on the boat ride out on the Bay. And somebody had been drinking. And my mother pushed us children underneath the table because they were shooting. I have never been on a boat ride since! I don't go on no boat rides, ever since that happened. They were shooting. So I said, "No more boat rides for me."

JW: Who were the people shooting? Were they Black or Italian or what?

AB: No, they were Black. That's when we got out with the Negroes. They started to...

JW: Oh, this was a chartered boat?

AB: Yes. It was chartered. We used to have good picnics. But they don't have no picnics or nothing anymore. And Fillmore Street was a beautiful street! Oh, it was beautiful! They used to have those big lights...And they used to have portals [?] on Fillmore Street.

JW: Have what?

AB: Portals.[?]

JW: What is that?

AB: That's where everybody gets together. And we used to dress up and have parties. You know, everything was open. We used to have a good time. Everybody had a good time. Then down there...one time they had a costume party. Everybody went...White, colored, Black, everybody went...at the Civic Auditorium. My brother went as an Indian and I went as a Colonial girl. We rented costumes to go. We had ourselves all fixed up. And everybody danced together, White and colored. We never had no segregation about who danced with who and who danced with the other. And we used to...we went to that. But they don't have no celebrations like they used to have. We used to have a lot of celebrations.

JW: Did you ever go to any of the Italian festivals?

AB: Oh, yes.

JW: I don't know what their special holidays were here.

AB: Yes, they had special...they used to celebrate Easter. One of their biggest days was Easter...Italians would.

JW: Does that mean a parade and everything?

AB: Yes.

JW: What about Chinatown? Did you have any relationships with Chinese or Japanese people?

AB: No, we didn't mingle with them too much. They had pigtails in those days.

JW: You mean the Chinese?

AB: Yes. And we didn't...

JW: Did you go down to Chinatown to eat or anything like that?

AB: Yes, once in a while we would go down there, to Chinatown.

JW: Do you like Chinese food?

AB: Yes, I have a special place out on Thirty-eighth Avenue and Balboa I go to eat. It's Chinese. It's much cleaner than what it is down at Chinatown.

JW: What about the Japanese?

AB: Japanese kind of kept to themselves.

JW: But they lived right next to a lot of the Black people.

AB: Yes. But they kept to themselves mostly. But they were very friendly.

JW: I think that we will stop for today because we almost have two hours here.

END TAPE